



# Alexandria Times

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## Out of the Attic

### Honoring women of the Civil War

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*Image: Reenactors of female Civil War soldiers, courtesy Fort Ward Museum and Historic Site..*

In recognition of Women's History Month, the City of Alexandria's Fort Ward Museum will be featuring Civil War Women's Day on March 14 to highlight the essential and multi-faceted role that women played in the conflict – from nurses, spies and laundresses to relief agents, factory workers and soldiers.

From the onset of the war, women used their skills and patriotic determination to provide support for the war effort. Early in the war, sewing circles produced everything from clothing items to regimental flags, while later, hand-crafted clothing articles, food and other supplies were gathered and shipped to camps and battlefields to benefit the troops.

As the war progressed, women's relief efforts became more organized; they visited camps and battlefields to help care for soldiers, improved living conditions for them and delivered much-needed medical supplies. In Alexandria, the efforts of relief agents like Amy Bradley and Mary Livermore helped make life more tolerable for soldiers at Camp Convalescent near Shuter's Hill – known as Camp Misery by the soldiers. They were influential in having the camp moved to a more favorable location.

Women were integral to relief organizations like the U.S. Sanitary Commission, a forerunner of the American Red Cross, whose motto was "To Aid and Comfort" the troops. Women on both sides were also instrumental in organizing fundraising efforts for the welfare of soldiers and veterans.

The Civil War also opened new work opportunities for women, prompted by the shortage of manpower at home and in a variety of industries. Many women in the North and South assumed farming responsibilities while their men were at war. Others joined the work force in factories and mills, employed in positions that would have been deemed unsuitable for women prior to the war. Some worked in munitions factories, filling cartridges for rifles, a necessary occupation for the war effort but also a dangerous one as evidenced by arsenal explosions in 1862, 1863 and 1864 that killed more than 100 women.

The shortage of doctors and extreme need for adequate medical care led thousands of women to serve as nurses in camps, on the battlefield and in Union and Confederate military hospitals. Some are well known for their roles, like Dorothea Dix, who organized the first women's nursing corps for the





## Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

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Federal army, and Clara Barton, who became legendary for tending to the wounded on the battlefield. Others include African American nurse Susie King Taylor, who cared for soldiers in her husband's black regiment and taught the men to read. In Richmond, Sally Tompkins operated one of the best-run hospitals in the city, which earned her the military rank of captain.

There are also hundreds of documented cases of women who disguised their gender to enlist and serve as soldiers. Rosetta Wakeman, a farm girl who enlisted in the 153rd New York Volunteer Infantry as Lyons Wakeman, was posted to guard duty in Alexandria before being moved to the front in 1864 to fight in the Red River Campaign. Sarah Edmonds, who joined the 2nd Michigan Infantry in 1861 under the name Frank Thompson, acted as a spy for Gen. McClellan, who was unaware of her true identity. And Jennie Hodgers, known as Albert Cashier, fought in a number of battles, continued her male identity after the war and collected a soldier's pension.

Learn more about the remarkable women of the Civil War era at Fort Ward's program on March 14, from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. In addition to interpretive stations on women's relief efforts, women soldiers and women in the work force, there will be a display of women's clothing and accessories and a spinning demonstration. The program is free and appropriate for all ages.

*"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.*

*These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria. Today's column was provided by Susan Cumbey, director of Fort Ward Museum and Historic Site.*